

Siena: The Rise of Painting Assignment

Dr. Horton / ARTH 220

Due: Tuesday November 14th, upload to Brightspace.

- 1. Visit the special exhibition, Siena: The Rise of Painting at the Metropolitan Museum of Art:**
Visiting the museum is part of the assignment. Attach some sort of “proof” that you went to the museum to your assignment, such as a selfie with the art. Plan on spending at least 2 hours in the museum.

Location: 1000 Fifth Avenue (83rd Street and Fifth Avenue in Manhattan)

Hours: Sunday-Tuesday, 10-5 / Friday and Saturday 10-9, Closed Wednesday

Tickets: Take your QC ID to any admissions desk to get a ticket. Admission for students from NYC is “pay what you wish.” (Donate \$0.25 or \$1...)

The website, <https://www.metmuseum.org>, has lots of helpful info about directions, etc. There is free WiFi.

- 2. Assignment: Complete 1-page responses to FOUR of the five questions below.** You can ignore one question – you pick. You do not need to write an Intro/Conclusion. Just list the question you are answering and then answer it. You will turn in about 4 pages of writing altogether.

You do not have to respond to the OBSERVE prompts.

You will find the exhibition on the second floor, in Gallery 999. Follow signs or ask a helpful guard for directions.

WHAT TO EXPECT:

The special exhibit -- a temporary display of works focusing on a theme – explores painting in Siena from about 1300-1350, a period often described as the beginning of the Renaissance. It includes paintings by Siena’s four most famous painters: Duccio, Simone Martini, and the Lorenzetti brothers - Ambrogio and Pietro. Siena’s population was decimated by the Black Death, starting in 1348. None of these painters survived. By the time the city of Siena recovered in the 1500’s, other cities such as Florence and Rome had come to define Renaissance art, eclipsing Siena. This exhibit highlights a distinctive, “alternate” Renaissance.

Many of the show’s themes will be familiar from class: questions of icons and “living” images, compositional techniques that define space and bodies, painting formats (what shapes and sizes do paintings come in?), as well as materials and techniques (gold, punchwork, tempera, manuscripts...). The installation also offers many chances to see the backs of paintings (!), to imagine holding them, and to observe small details up close. It is very unlikely that most of these works will travel to the US or be gathered in one space again (in our lifetimes.) Savor.

OBSERVE, OPENING GALLERY.

Crowds tend to congregate in the first gallery of exhibitions. But don't miss the carefully chosen objects here.

- (1) a Byzantine icon;
- (2) a small Madonna and Child altarpiece by Duccio;
- (3) an ivory statuette from France;
- (4) part of a wooden head of Christ, mostly destroyed. (Read the two little notes found inside the head!)

These four objects, placed together, are the “thesis” of the exhibit, since they highlight the main themes explored in the rest of the galleries.

- What is Siena's relationship to Byzantine icons and to French art?
- How are painting and sculpture related, stylistically?
- The relationship between art and the divine runs through everything here. One of the notes in the wooden head is a sort of prayer. How do objects connect people to the spiritual?
- What is the role and status of the artist? The other note in the wooden head declares the painter's name.

Maestà

In the next large gallery, about half the room is dedicated to panels from Duccio's *Maestà*.

In class we discussed that this once enormous altarpiece was sliced up in the 18th century and sold in pieces. EIGHT of the panels – from around the globe – are shown together here. (That's a lot.)

- Take a moment to look at the *Raising of Lazarus* scene in particular. We spent a good deal of time in class with Giotto's version, a fresco. Think about how Duccio makes similar and different choices. (Look for the person reacting to the smell.)
- In the *Temptation of Christ* scene, notice how the dark paint defining the devil's body has been scraped. Pictures have power! Perhaps this painting was attacked to ward off the evil spirit invoked in the image.

QUESTION 1:

Often, art historians separate a “linear” style, where forms, like drapery and bodies, are defined by outlines, from a “painterly” style, where forms are defined by shadows and highlights. Usually, Sieneese painting is described as more linear, whereas other centers are described as more painterly. In addition, the linear style is often described as less naturalistic or - according to the terms of Vasari's Renaissance - less advanced than the painterly style.

- Look at Duccio's painting of the *Transfiguration* from the *Maestà* Predella Panels. (Find the title on the label.)

Transfiguration means when something changes its form and appearance dramatically. In Christianity, the Transfiguration is the scene when Jesus Christ's appearance changes from a “regular” human into a deity in front of three of his followers. (The followers are the three guys on the lower part; the other two figures are Moses and Elijah, Old Testament figures who prophesied the Transfiguration and ‘magically’ appear at this important moment. See their scrolls?) **In particular Jesus is described as shining like the sun.

- In Duccio's painting, Christ is in the center. Sometimes people say that he seems to levitate or float — off the rocks and off the panel. In 1-2 paragraphs, describe how Duccio creates that effect.
- Look closely at the bodies. Think about how candlelight would have bounced off of the gold and been absorbed by the tempera paint.
- Looking from Jesus Christ to the followers, do you see a more “linear” style, where the body is mostly defined by outlines, or a more “painterly” style, where the body is mostly defined by light and shadow? How does Duccio use these two approaches to paint the *Transfiguration*?

QUESTION 2:

As you know, ‘the materials of art have their own logic.’ But most artists were able to work across media and they definitely transferred approaches to composition, color, story-telling, etc. across media. The Siena exhibit provides a number of opportunities to compare painting with metalwork, ivory, enamels, textiles, and more.

- Consider: in a show that’s mostly about painting, why did the curators highlight other media — enamels, ivory, textiles, metalwork?
- Choose one painting and one object from another medium. (Pick objects displayed close together.) In 1-2 paragraphs, compare and contrast your two objects.
 - Which qualities “transfer” across media / which don’t? Be sure to think about qualities like composition (how does the artist “tell” you where to look?), color (bright/dull, shifting/solid), light (absorbed/reflected, shiny/flat), and story-telling in your comparison.
 - How does the medium shape the artist’s approach?

QUESTION 3:

As you move through the exhibit, keep this word in mind — TACTILE.

Tactile means perceived by touch or surfaces that are attractive to touch.

Don’t touch anything (!), but be aware of how many of these objects were designed to be held and touched.

Consider how light “touches” the surface of paintings, slipping over spans of gold, catching on the tiny divots and mounds in the punchwork...

- When you notice a painting with a strong sense of tactility, pause and look closely.
- Then take a photo with your phone. Compare your photo with the painting.
- In 1 paragraph, describe how the painting looks different in the photo compared to in the gallery.
 - What is gained and lost?
 - How do the color, light effects, scale, and your overall impression change as you look at the photo or the painting?
 - Keep that word – tactile – in mind when you make your comparison.

QUESTION 4:

Find Ambrogio Lorenzetti’s *Annunciation* (1344). It’s a fairly large square painting with a gold background and an elaborately patterned floor, in the fourth-ish gallery.

Remember, linear perspective creates the impression that a flat, 2-dimensional panel recedes, as if we’re looking into 3-dimensional space. This is what people mean when they say that the ‘wall is like a window.’ We look *through* the wall into another world.

In contrast, notice how most paintings in this exhibit, with gold backgrounds and painted figures have the opposite effect. The gold reflects light, “dissolving” the wall, but the background is closed off from our prying eyes. The message: we can’t go into the holy realm; we can only marvel and hope that the holy figures come to our world. And they do! Notice how the painted figures seem to swell from the gold background toward us, as if the holy people are coming into our space.

- In 1 paragraph describe how the two spatial approaches described above are present in Lorenzetti’s *Annunciation*.
 - Do you see elements of linear perspective?
 - In contrast how does the gold background work, in relation to the figures?
 - How does Lorenzetti suggest that the scene is both ‘of our world’ and also not?

OBSERVE:

Most of the paintings from this time were not single panel paintings, meant to be hung on a wall. More often, they were fitted into elaborate frames that would stand on altars. Often, they have wings that open and close, almost like books. Notice the backs of paintings – fascinating! Some are beautifully painted, suggesting they would be viewed when closed.

Look at the impressively large *Tarlatti Polyptych* (1320) by Pietro Lorenzetti from the front, as well as behind where you can admire the sturdy, intricate carpentry. (Remember carpenters were typically paid more than painters.)

It was not until the 1500's that paintings were typically made on canvas, a Venetian innovation, which made paintings lighter and easier to transport.

QUESTION 5:

Find the *Orsini Polyptych* by Simone Martini. It's a series of four panels, originally hinged together to fold and expand like an accordion book.

Siene painting is known for rich details especially. It's likely that the connections between Siena and Northern Europe were one factor in the intricate painting style that developed in Flanders (from class, think of Campin's *Annunciation Altarpiece*, for example).

- Take some time to really look closely at all the panels of the painting.
- In 1 paragraph, identify and describe 2-3 details that really “make” the painting. Those small spots that catch your eye and hold your attention. What's similar or different from other versions of the same scenes that you know from class or from this exhibit?
- Notice the manuscript displayed nearby, *The Belles Heures of Jean de France, duc de Berry* by the Limbourg Brothers. (Same guys as the Northern Renaissance manuscripts we looked at in class.)
 - In 1 paragraph, consider: Why did the curators place the manuscript here?

OBSERVE In the last gallery, be sure to spend a minute with Simone Martini's *Christ Discovered in the Temple*. It shows a family drama that feels terribly familiar.

Short version: Jesus runs away when he's 12. After three days of searching, his worried his father, Joseph, finds him in a temple where Jesus is talking with teachers. Joseph brings him home to Mary and asks Jesus to explain himself. Jesus is not having it. I mean, he's God and he was in a temple; “come on Mom...”

But look at their eyes, look at their hands — the fingers of Joseph's left hand gingerly placed on his son's shoulder! The set of Jesus's mouth, so angry! Growing up is hard.

Painters like Giotto are usually said to capture the humanity of holy figures, fusing the spiritual and familiar. But this painting really demonstrates that the combination is also a strong part of Siene painting as well.